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A Most Benedictine Coach

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A Most Benedictine Coach

Listen...with the ear of your heart. *Prologue—The Rule of Saint Benedict.*

John Gagliardi was born into an Italian-American family in 1926. I never heard John talk about the role religion played in his upbringing, but it seems highly likely that a Catholic family in that era would have been regular church goers, prayed before meals, encouraged children to pray at bedtime, maybe said an occasional rosary together as a family, and for the adults to have had their own personal prayer life. What was certain was that John did not have any exposure to the Benedictines.

When he was recruited from Carroll College in 1953, John did not know much about Saint John's University, to say nothing of the Benedictine tradition that is the foundation of Saint John's Abbey and University. John, however, was deeply Benedictine even if he didn't know it at the time, and, through grace or luck or both, he found himself at the perfect place to live out a 60-year Benedictine coaching vocation.



Much has been written about John’s coaching gifts and philosophy, but I have always thought that John’s success on the gridiron and far beyond was succinctly captured by the first word of the Rule of Saint Benedict: *Listen*.

John was famous for being able to adjust a game plan in real time, particularly during halftime, to account for new information, changing conditions and the opposition’s own plans. A player of John’s recounted how this happened. “John relied on his players on the field to tell him what was happening on the ground and what they were experiencing in the game. He would then take that information and use it to adjust what we were doing. At halftime we would revise our game plan in order to use what his players were telling him.” John was willing to listen and learn about football from his 20 year-old players.

John, of course, is most famous for his football success, but in a different era in college athletics, coaches often were called upon to coach multiple sports, often regardless of their knowledge of said sport. In his time at Saint John’s, John coached track and field, a sport with its sprinters, shot putters and discus throwers that is at least tangentially related to football.

But John was also the Saint John’s hockey coach for five years, 1954-59. The sport has hitting, like football, but the similarity ends there. John knew nothing about hockey when he started. In fact, at a time when practice was typically outdoors, John was known to call off practice when he got too cold standing on the edge of the rink, not a policy that a true hockey aficionado would countenance.

Yet among the 16 hockey coaches at Saint John's who coached more than one season, John Gagliardi has the highest winning percentage, a fact he wryly loved to share with his young hockey coaching colleagues, including Olympian John Harrington who is number two on that list.

How did a guy who literally knew nothing about hockey—I'm not sure he could even skate—lead his teams to this success? My hypothesis is that he simply listened. He learned about hockey from his players. He listened to what they suggested and shared about their individual abilities and each other's talents, and then John built a team and let them play.

My favorite story of John's listening comes from one of John's early All-Americans. This young man came to visit campus with his parents. As they were touring with John, the young man noted, with some surprise and mild consternation, that John was talking almost exclusively to his mother, who thought that football was a "dumb" game. As he eavesdropped on the conversation, he heard John say to his mother, "After your son graduates from Saint John's, do you think he will go on to get an MD or a Ph.D.?"

On the way home, Mom made it clear that Saint John's was the perfect place for this young man. He went on to get a Ph.D.

Listen to understand. Listen to learn. Listen with empathy. Listen with the ear of your heart.

Life lessons from Saint Benedict and John Gagliardi.

Rest in Peace, John Gagliardi, a Benedictine coach if ever there was one.

Posted on October 15, 2018, John Gagliardi Day in Minnesota.

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